

Hizballah Calls for Referendum on its Weapons

Contributed by Maj. W. Thomas Smith Jr.
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Hizballah, the Iranian-Syrian-backed Shia terrorist organization — perhaps the best-organized, most heavily-financed, most-dangerous organization on the U.S. State Department's designated terrorist list — has called for a national referendum on whether-or-not the issue of its weapons-possession in Lebanon should be accepted or rejected by the Lebanese people.

Until May of 2008 — when Hizballah and its allies launched a series of armed attacks against the government and the Lebanese citizenry — it was widely accepted that the pro-democracy majority in Lebanon supported the United Nations' call for Hizballah to disarm along with all other militias in Lebanon.

But the sudden, unprecedented call for a referendum this week suggests the terrorist group — emboldened by its political, military, and geostrategic gains since May — believes it has forcibly intimidated the Lebanese people to the point that the majority is no longer capable of standing up for true democracy. And a referendum in favor of Hizballah's weapons might forever quash international demands for Hizballah to disarm.

The issuance of such a call is a clear expression of Hizballah's confidence in its ability to advance its control of Lebanon. It's also a huge gamble for the terrorist organization.

Why take the risk? We asked Professor Walid Phares, director of the Future of Terrorism Project at the Washington-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (and a visiting fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels).

W. THOMAS SMITH JR.: Why would Hizballah call for a referendum when they know that the pro-democracy movement (which is a majority) in Lebanon is against Hizballah having weapons?

DR. WALID PHARES: We have to understand the geopolitics of Lebanon have dramatically changed since last May. Any analysis of Hizballah's positions and initiatives today must be developed based on the new factor in the equation, which is that Hizballah's control of Lebanon's national security. Hence, when Hizballah's leaders offer to submit their weapons-possession to a referendum it means they have insured a military-protected control mechanism over the political process in the country. They can determine the answer to the referendum, which negates the validity of the referendum.

Yes, it is true that on March 14, 2005, one-and-a-half million Lebanese from all religious and ethnic sectors marched against the Syrian occupation and terrorist militias. But that clear cut popular majority has since been undermined, intimidated, and essentially defeated over the past three years. The assassinations of representatives of the Cedars Revolution such as Parliamentarian Gibran Tuani, the attempt to kill outspoken journalists such as May Chidiac, and the militia invasion of Beirut and the Chouf districts in May are all evidence that Lebanon today lives under terror and needs significant help from the international community so that its people can exercise free popular referendums.

Ironically, I had suggested via Arab satellite TV three years ago, that the Lebanese people be allowed to decide on the weapons of Hizballah, in other words should an armed militia be permitted to exist outside the Lebanese Army. At that time and since then, no one from Hizballah or even the March 14 coalition considered the initiative. Obviously, at the time it wasn't in Hizballah's interest to accept a referendum knowing that an overwhelming majority of citizens would vote "no." But after three years — and particularly since May 2008 — it appears as if they feel confident they can get a majority of Lebanese to agree to their keeping these weapons. Since they have the upper hand in the country militarily, they believe they can pull it off. As for March 14 and the Lebanese government: both have had multiple opportunities to have the UN by their side helping them implement UNSCR 1559. Unfortunately, they hesitated and lost that opportunity. In short, Hizballah's call today for a referendum means they are close to transforming Lebanon into another Iran or Venezuela.

SMITH: Agreed. But why risk it? Hizballah already holds all the cards, so why try for a different hand?

DR. PHARES: Hizballah is taking full advantage of the post-May era in Lebanon since seizing power; first on the ground in Beirut, then when its military role was recognized at the Doha Conference. And as the United States was preoccupied

with its presidential campaigns and election, the Iranian-backed Hizballah moved forward to consolidate its gains and achieve as many small victories on the ground and in the government in order to insure its influence over more than a third of the cabinet and then enjoying the fact the new president of Lebanon would not – and will not – move against the group.

Now, with the election of a new U.S. president, the impression of the Iranian leaders is that they may have some time where diplomatic engagement may occur. Hence, the mood in Hizballah's camp is that the time is ripe to further consolidate their grip over Lebanon and thus completely bypass UN resolutions by calling for a referendum over their weapons, and win it easily. Is it a risk? Unless the other side and the international community seize the opportunity and corner Hizballah, it won't be a risk.

SMITH: So do you believe that accepting the suggestion of Hizballah regarding a weapons referendum should be considered?

DR. PHARES: Yes, but only if there is smart, strong Lebanese leadership able to turn the initiative in the right direction. Because, after all, there is a real popular-majority in Lebanon, which is opposed to the armed militias, particularly to the pro-Iranian forces. This is a fact that has not changed.

In fact, according to the information I have, the anti-Hizballah majority has grown wider among the masses within the various communities: not the other way around. If the leaders of the Cedars Revolution are politically intelligent they would accept Hizballah's proposal and take the challenge all the way. If they recollect themselves and think strategically, they can pull a massive victory with democratic means.

SMITH: What if a majority voted "yes" for Hizballah's weapons? Would that not be another victory for Hizballah?

DR. PHARES: Knowing the real aspirations of the public, I would accept that risk.

First, the advantage would be that Hizballah would have moved the legitimacy of their weapons from the divine level to the citizens' level. That alone is significant.

Second, if the Lebanese are provided with all international mechanisms to express themselves freely, they will surprise Hizballah as well as their own elected representatives. The question is to enable the Lebanese to express themselves freely.

Even in the absence of the implementation of UNSCR 1559, a mechanism is possible to organize a real referendum. I'd say, it is feasible and has high chances for success. The question again is about the ability of Lebanese politicians to focus and act strategically, and not sink or be maneuvered into the narrowness which has led to so many setbacks to democracy in that unlucky country.

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